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LETTER DATED 20 MAY 1999 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

I have the honour to transmit herewith the text of a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation concerning the capture in Angola by the forces of the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) of the Russian crew of a civilian aircraft shot down by them near Luzamba.

I should be grateful if you would have this letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) S. LAVROV

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Annex

Statement issued on 20 May 1999 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

On 12 May 1999 an AN-26 civilian aircraft was shot down in Angola near the town of Luzamba, Lunda Norte province. The Russian crew (flight commander A. L. Zaitsev, co-pilot S. K. Zakharov and flight engineer S. I. Chestyakov) were captured by the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) opposition to the Angolan Government. The aircraft was chartered by an Angolan company - "Avita" - and was used to transport food and other civilian cargo on domestic Angolan routes under a commercial contract with that company.

According to available information, the aircraft was struck by a missile, which hit its left engine. UNITA took responsibility for this act. Thus, the UNITA leadership publicly recognized the fact of the destruction of a civilian aircraft over the territories it controls and the capture of the crew.

It is significant that over the past nine months seven aircraft have been shot down or disappeared without trace in Angola, including two United Nations aircraft and four aircraft with Russian crews. In all these cases UNITA has refused to cooperate with the international community in investigating the incidents.

In Moscow the incident involving the AN-26 aircraft and the capture of its crew are regarded as a flagrant violation of the foundations of international law and an act of international terrorism. This was a civilian aircraft, which transported only commercial cargoes. The Russian airmen had never been in the service of the Angolan air force, and had not participated in assignments for the Angolan army or in military action. In this connection, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation is authorized to state that the accusations of mercenarism made by UNITA against the Russian aviators are totally far-fetched and have absolutely no foundation.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation demands the immediate and unconditional release of all Russian citizens captured by UNITA and illegally held.

The UNITA leadership bears full responsibility for the possible consequences of this barbaric act, and for the safety and health of the Russian citizens.